**DOCUMENTING YOUR ARTWORK**

Quality documentation of your artwork is an essential part of your studio practice. Artists are expected to have functional, up-to-date websites with excellent images of their work. Paying someone to document your work is always costly and is a skill you can master with some basic knowledge of camera controls and editing software.

**Use the best camera you can find.**

DSLRs are very common today, and if you don’t already own one, and don’t know someone who does, you can purchase a decent used one for less than $300, often with a lens included. A high quality camera will allow you to capture higher resolution images and give you greater control.

**Always shoot in RAW.**

RAW is a file format used by DSLRs, some mirrorless cameras, and even some high-end point and shoot cameras. The RAW file format saves all of the data the camera’s sensor has captured in an uncompressed, read-only file. JPEG is the most common file type, but is compressed, applies preset parameters to the image, and over time can be easily degraded.

**Choose good lighting.**

The goal of documenting your artwork is to give an accurate depiction of the piece you are photographing. You want to make sure to capture things like surface detail and color as best you can, and lighting plays a huge part in how successful your images will be. Photographing in a living room or outside on a sunny day on the sidewalk will not usually yield good results. In general, the best light will be flat and even, whether indoors or out.

If you are photographing indoors, the best place to start is by using two lights positioned at 45° to your piece. If your work is painting, drawing, or similar, hang the piece on the wall, like this:

![Diagram of lighting setup](image)

If your work is three dimensional, like sculpture or ceramics, jewelry, etc., you will likely need a backdrop. Seamless paper, sheets, curtains, foam core, any of these things will work, but must be clean, wrinkle free, and plain. If you are using sheets, please make sure they do not have fold lines and creases in them.
Seamless paper, is the standard, and is a relatively easy way to achieve the results you are after. You can have a simple, uncluttered background that focuses attention on your piece.

If you are photographing outside choose a spot that is in shade, but not the deepest shade of a forest or underpass. The north facing side of a building will usually yield some beautiful light, but any flat, even shade will be great. Set your piece up against a wall or on an easel, just make sure you aren’t obscuring the edges with grass or easel pieces. Photographing work outdoors is the simplest way to get good results without much set up at all.

For installation work, try to give the viewer a sense of what it is like to experience the piece. Close up shots, varying angles, lighting, and mood are very important in documentation of installation work.

**Use a medium aperture, low ISO, and a tripod.**

In order to get the sharpest, least noisy images, you should shoot at ISO 100, somewhere around f/11, and on a tripod. If you have access to a remote shutter release, and understand how to use the mirror lock-up function if you are using a DSLR, all the better. A low ISO will give you images with much less noise, creating smoother gradients and more accurate color. A medium aperture, like f/11, allows your lens to perform at its sharpest, and should give you enough depth of field to cover the object you are trying to photograph. If your work is particularly small, like jewelry, you may need a macro lens to really capture the detail you are after, but in general, a standard lens will be fine. Shooting on a tripod will help compensate for the slow shutter speeds you may encounter while shooting with a low ISO and small aperture, especially if you are shooting in the shade.
Exposure
Exposure refers to how much light is hitting the sensor in your digital camera. Overexposure means too much light got to the sensor, underexposure means too little light go to the sensor. Both of these errors will decrease the quality of your final image, and are easily avoided. All modern cameras allow you to access a histogram, which is a graphical representation of the tones and/or colors in your image.

Below is an illustration of the same image with underexposure, normal exposure, and overexposure:

Note how the histogram displays for each image. With underexposure the data is cut off or “clipped” on the left side of the graph, where shadows are represented. The histogram in the center shows data that represents a good tonal range, with nothing cut off on either side, and the data going all the way from shadows to highlights. The histogram on the right, representing overexposure, is all piled up on the right side of the graph, showing clipping in the highlights. Just looking at the image on your camera’s LCD screen is not enough, as that screen does not always tell the truth about what you have captured. Using the histogram will ensure that you have not clipped the shadows or highlights, and that you have a good base image to start with.

White Balance
White balance is a term that refers to removing unwanted color casts in your photograph. Different light sources have different colored light, which is measured in degrees Kelvin. Here are some common, and generalized, temperatures of light:
Setting the correct white balance when you are photographing your artwork isn’t the most important step in this process, but it is best to try to get your images as close to perfect in your camera as possible, so that you have less post-production work to undertake. In the illustration above, you will see some common icons used on most cameras to identify different white balance options. Many cameras also have auto white balance, often displayed as AWB. In most cases, AWB will do a fine job.
To be sure you can get colors as accurate as possible, there are two possible options that can be used separately or in conjunction. The first option is to set a custom white balance. Many cameras will allow you to do this, and the process is relatively simple:

1. Once your artwork is setup and you have your lights positioned the way you want them, place a piece of plain white paper, a white card, foamcore, or some other neutral white or grey object in front of the piece you are shooting.
2. Get close enough to the object that it fills the entire frame of the image. It doesn’t really matter whether or not it is in focus, so don’t worry if you have to get so close to it that your camera can’t focus.
3. Make sure you aren’t casting a shadow on the paper, and take a photograph.
4. On your camera’s menu, find the option to set a custom white balance, and choose the photograph you took of the white object.
5. Select the custom white balance option on your camera, which generally looks like this:

The second tool that will allow you to achieve more accurate white balance is a gray card. As discussed in the exposure section of this document, the gray card can allow you to make a more accurate exposure. You can also use it to calibrate the colors in your image in Photoshop, Lightroom, GIMP, or other image editing software. Set up your artwork and lights as normal, obtain a correct exposure, and make at least one image with the gray card in the picture. You can use the middle gray eyedropper tool in Photoshop Levels, or the eyedropper tool in Lightroom White Balance, click on the gray card in your image, and watch the colors shift back to a much more accurate representation of your work.